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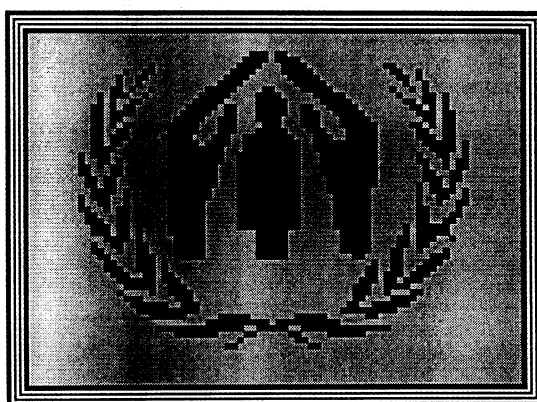
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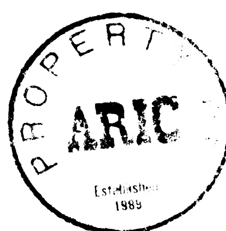
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UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

OPERATIONS IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN



INFORMATION PAPER

(May 1999)



Islamic Republic of Iran

REFUGEE POPULATION IN IRAN

1. The Islamic Republic of Iran continues to host the world's largest refugee population. According to government estimates nearly two million persons have taken refuge in Iran, including 1.4 million Afghans and approximately 530,000 Iraqis. Only a very small portion of that refugee population lives in thirty designated camps (Annex I); the rest is scattered throughout the country, largely in provinces bordering Afghanistan and Iraq as well as major urban centers.

2. The majority of **Afghans** came to Iran during the period of Soviet military presence in Afghanistan in the 1980s and up to the end of the Najibullah regime in 1992. Since then, Afghans have continued to trickle in, but without any sudden major influx. However, following the events in Mazar-e-Sharif and Bamyan in 1998, an increase in arrivals of Hazara Afghans was noticed. Afghan refugees in Iran include a majority of Hazara Shiites, followed by Tajiks, Pashtoons and others.

3. The **Iraqi** refugees consist of three categories: (i) Iraqi Kurds from the three northern provinces who came during the 70's and 80's; (ii) Feilli Kurds (Shiites) who were denied Iraqi citizenship on the grounds of their Iranian origin although they had been in Iraq for several generations; and (iii) Arab Shiites from government-controlled areas in the central and southern provinces of Iraq. The last two groups entered into Iran mainly during the Iran-Iraq war (1980 - '88).

UNHCR PRESENCE IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

4. UNHCR's assistance to refugees in Iran started modestly in 1983 following a first cooperation agreement with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. At the beginning of 1985, UNHCR established a separate Office of the Charge de Mission in Tehran and gradually developed more comprehensive assistance programmes.

5. Following new massive influxes in 1991, in the aftermath of the second Persian Gulf War, and with the beginning of return movements to Afghanistan in 1992, UNHCR substantially expanded its presence as well as the scope of its activities in Iran. On 27 November 1992, UNHCR and the Government of Islamic Republic of Iran signed a Memorandum of Understanding to further strengthen and formalize their cooperation.

6. At present, in addition to its central office in Tehran, UNHCR has three sub-offices, in Mashad, Orumieh and Ahwaz, two field-offices, in Kermanshah and Zahedan, and border field posts in Dogharun (Khoransan Province) and Milak (Sistan-Baluchistan Province). In 1999, the number of UNHCR staff in Iran is 96, including 14 international and 82 locally-recruited staff.

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS / UNHCR 1999-2000 OBJECTIVES

7. Iran's generosity in accepting so many refugees over the years has been rightly praised. Today, however, many in Iran feel that the country can no longer afford that generosity. Economic difficulties, high rates of unemployment among the Iranian population and the frustration of not seeing an end to a refugee situation which, for the Afghans, is entering its twentieth year have led many people to think that refugees should go home. This impatience and frustration have often led to forced returns or deportations. Such measures have intensified during the last year, at times leading to most unfortunate situations: families being split, holders of valid documents being deported and persons being stranded after deportation as they could not, for their own safety, return to places in Afghanistan where they used to live.

8. Aware of these problems and wishing to resume a dignified form of voluntary repatriation that would also provide a "safety net" for those who have valid claims to protection, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and UNHCR have agreed on a Joint Programme of support to voluntary repatriation. The programme features three major components: (i) facilitating voluntary returns through material support, (ii) instituting, in parallel, a screening mechanism to ascertain the status of those claiming protection and providing documentation to those found eligible, and (iii) launching an information campaign to ensure that all undocumented Afghans opt for either voluntary return or present their claim for protection within a period of six months.

9. In the above context and also taking into account the increased material vulnerability of refugees, particularly those outside camps, UNHCR pursues four major programme objectives for the period 1999-2000:

i) to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Afghan and Iraqi refugees wherever feasible. Current planning assumptions for 1999 indicate that up to 104,000 Afghans and 30,000 Iraqi could return during the year;

ii) to ensure that a mechanism is put in place that will allow genuine refugees to be identified through a transparent and fair procedure and to be protected if found eligible;

iii) in parallel to continued camp assistance, to further develop measures for refugees living outside camps through integrated small-scale community projects and micro-credit schemes reducing dependency and fostering self-reliance pending repatriation; and

iv) in agreement with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to develop new partnerships for refugee care and for improving awareness of refugee problems with national and international NGOs, specialized UN Agencies and the civil society at large.

UNHCR IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS IN IRAN

10. UNHCR maintains direct working relations with the Ministries of Interior (primarily a special office called "Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants' Affairs" directly reporting to the Minister), Foreign Affairs, Health and Education. Amongst UN agencies in Iran, WFP is UNHCR's main operational partner, providing food items to vulnerable refugees, mainly in camps and to those repatriating under UNHCR's auspices. With UNHCR financing, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is arranging transport for the Afghan and Iraqi repatriates from various locations in the country to the official Border Exit Stations. In addition, UNHCR maintains working relations with the Iranian Red Crescent Society as well as with a number of NGOs operational in Iran. The International Consortium for Refugees in Iran (ICRI), located in UNHCR premises in Tehran, acts as a liaison office for the coordination of NGO activities related to refugees in Iran.

BUDGETS AND PROGRAMMES

11. During the sixteen years of its activities in Iran, UNHCR has spent an average of some US$ 20 million a year for programmes benefiting both the Afghan and the Iraqi refugees. The peak expenditure was reached following the massive influx of Iraqi Kurds in 1991 when programmes worth a total of nearly US$ 60 million were implemented.

12. For 1999, the target for UNHCR's programmes stands at US$ 17,8 million (see Annex II). This target may have to be modified, however, depending on the level of donor support and on other factors affecting implementation

PROTECTION AND VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION

13. At a time when the overall protection situation of refugees in Iran is becoming increasingly problematic, UNHCR has given high priority in its dialogue with Iranian authorities to the following issues: status and documentation of Afghan and Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers, standards of treatment in accordance with relevant international refugee law, the situation of undocumented refugees, employment and the establishment of a status determination procedure for new arrivals. The challenge is to agree with the authorities on concrete measures that could improve protection for refugees. In exceptional cases, UNHCR has proposed the resettlement in a third country of cases requiring such an exceptional measure. UNHCR cooperates with several governments in that effort.

14. Voluntary Repatriation of Afghan Refugees: From 1992 to the end of April 1999, some 582,303 Afghans voluntarily repatriated to Afghanistan with the assistance of UNHCR (Annex III). It is also estimated that within the same period, an additional one million Afghans in Iran returned spontaneously. A net decline in the number of Afghan returnees has been recorded since the end of 1995, particularly following the fall of Herat to Taliban forces.

15. At the end of 1998, there was a sudden increase in applications from groups of Afghans wishing to repatriate. A pilot project was launched using a transit camp in Mashad (Charcheshmeh) through which some 12,000 Afghans were assisted to return during a period of six weeks in November and December 1998. Candidates for voluntary return included mainly undocumented Afghans but also some documented refugees. They were interviewed by UNHCR staff in order to assess the voluntary character of their repatriation and received assistance in the form of transport and, for the most needy, cash grants. One man was permitted to return to his place of residence in Iran after changing his mind about return to Afghanistan. Initially, only Tajiks were referring to the transit center but Hazaras, Pashtoons and Uzbeks too were later amongst the repatriates.

16. UNHCR is currently working on organizing for the beginning of June the return of nearly 1,500 Afghans who have registered prior to the actual launching at mid-June of the Joint Programme referred to in paragraph 8. This operation is being planned in consultation with the UNHCR office for Afghanistan.

17 Voluntary Repatriation of Iraqi refugees: UNHCR has been actively facilitating the voluntary repatriation of Iraqi Kurds originating from Northern Iraq and, in 1998, a total of 9,232 Iraqi Kurdish refugees returned voluntarily to their country, with a peak of 2,642 in July (Annex III). In August 1998, however, the Iraqi authorities requested that any repatriation should only proceed after clearance from Baghdad and transiting through government-controlled areas. Since then, most candidates for voluntary return have preferred to return by their own means. UNHCR is pursuing discussions with a view to resuming much needed support to these return movements.

Monthly Refugee Camps Statistics(As of 30 April 1999)

Afghan Refugees' Camps

Province	City	Camp Name	Camp No.*	Yr. Estd.	Pop.
Markazi	Saveh	Shahid Naseri	1	1988	2,826
Semnan	Semnan	Ansar	2	1990	2,223
Bushehr	Bushehr	Dalaki	3	1990	2,166
Kerman	Rafsanjan	Rafsanjan	4	1984	5,300
	Bardsir	Bardsir	5	1983	7,250
Sistan Baluchistan	Zabol	Niatak	6	1989	8,875
Khorasan	Torbat-e-Jam	Torbat-e-Jam**	7	1998	7,991
Total		7 Camps			36,631

Iraqi Refugees' Camps

a) Kurds:

Province	City	Camp Name	Camp No.	Yr. Estd.	Pop.
Zanjan	Abhar	Soltaniyeh	8	1984	484
Kermanshah	Kermanshah	Sefid Chogha	9	1991	961
	Kangavar	Kangavar	10	1988	1,988
	Songhor	Songhor	11	1988	1,465
Kurdestan	Saghez	Sara	12	1988	450
	Dehgolan	Karimabad	13	1991	287
	Kamyaran	Varmahang	14	1988	679
	Mariwan	Dizli	15	1988	849
		Bahramabad	16	1988	586
West Azarbaijan	Orumiyeh	Ziveh	17	1977	9,464
	Sardasht	Bazileh	18	1988	680
	Piranshahr	Lavin	19	1988	397
		Dilzeh	20	1988	1,280
Total		13 Camps			19,570

b) Arabs:

Province	City	Camp Name	Camp No.	Yr. Estd.	Pop.
Markazi	Arak	Ebrahimabad	21	1995	2,826
Fars	Sarvestan	Beheshti	22	1980	2,313
	Jahrom	Dastgheib	23	1972	5,101
Lorestan	Azna	Abazar	24	1975	3,014
Khuzestan	Dezful	Ashrafi Esfahani	25	1991	11,925
		Motahari	26	1991	2,459
	Shushtar	Beheshti	27	1991	1,558
		Baninajjar (Gotvand)	28	1991	2,708
		Be'sat***	29	1992	3,111
	Andimeshk	Ansar	30	1991	6,536
Total		10Camps			41,551
Grand Total		30 Camps		97,752	

* See map inside cover
** Limited UNHCR assistance is provided in 1998 but no food provision
*** Since 1996 no UNHCR material assistance has been provided, IRCS provides food assistance.

Date: 10 May 1999

UNHCR Tehran
1999 Budgetary Targets by Sector *
(Amounts in US$) **

Sector	Assistance in Camps	Assistance Outside Camps	Assistance for Vol. Repat.	Total	%
A. Food	4,845	34,251	-	39,096	0.22
B. Transport/Logistics	108,990	60,572	2,360,990	2,530,552	14.24
C. Domestic Needs/Household Support	137,292	764,685	4,693,000	5,594,977	31.49
D. Water	415,246	57,004	-	472,250	2.66
E. Sanitation	286,884	45,542	-	332,426	1.87
F. Health/Nutrition	651,765	1,426,780	-	2,078,545	11.70
G. Shelter/Other Infrastructure	1,025,229	143,753	6,640	1,175,622	6.62
H. Community Services	127,811	167,364	-	295,175	1.66
I. Education	320,539	2,291,922	-	2,612,461	14.70
J. Crop Production	-	1,615	-	1,615	0.01
K. Livestock/Animal Husbandry	-	8,075	-	8,075	0.05
M. Forestry	31,000	-	-	31,000	0.17
N. Income Generation	54,538	327,858	-	382,396	2.15
O. Legal Assistance	-	146,860	53,000	199,860	1.12
P. Agency Operational Support	836,220	211,000	965,090	2,012,310	11.33
Total	**4,000,359**	**5,687,281**	**8,078,720**	**17,766,360**	**100.00**
%	**22.52**	**32.01**	**45.47**	**100.00**	

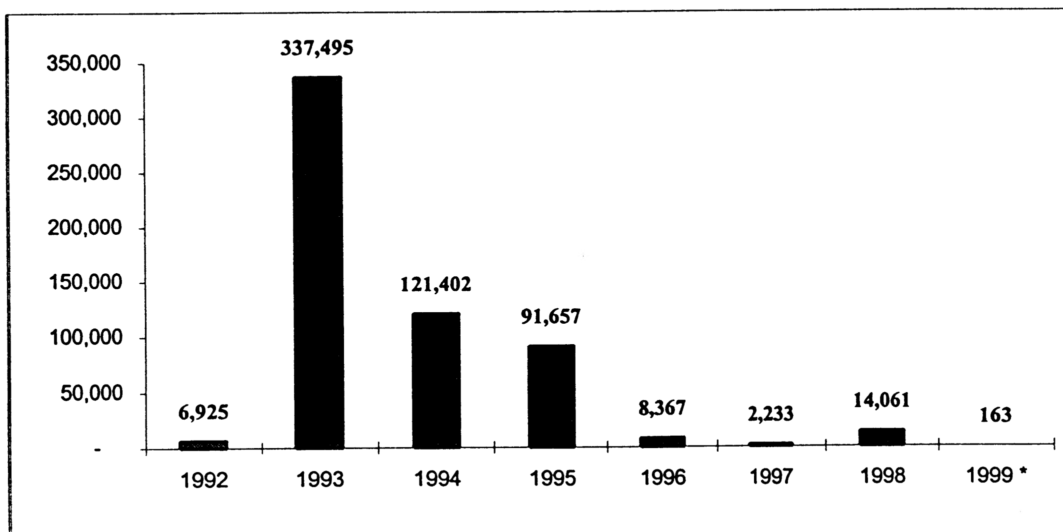
* Combined Annual Programme and Special Programme operational targets are subject to modifications which may result from funding shortfalls or revision of planning assumptions.

** Budgets are expressed in US dollars for ease of presentation / actual expenditures are mostly in Rials.

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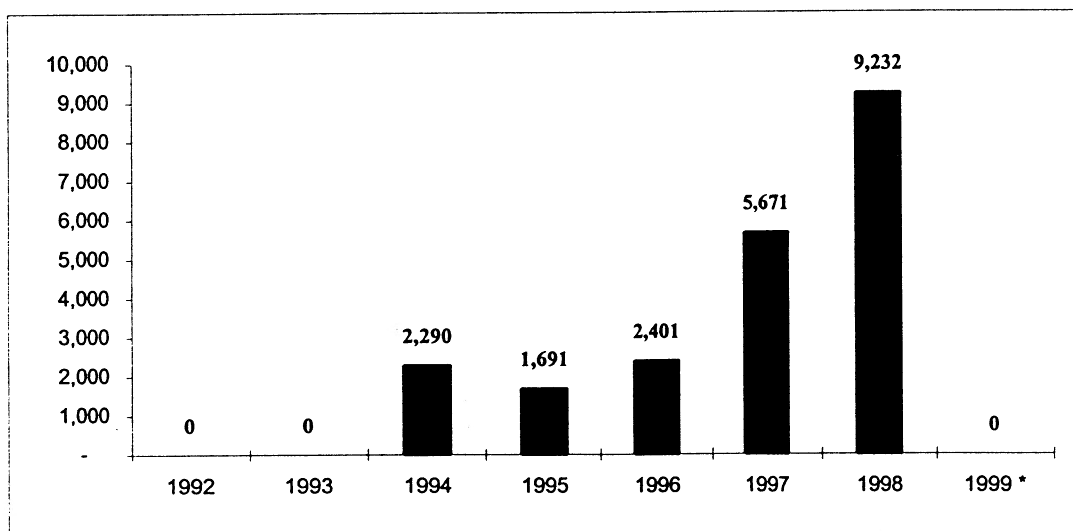
Trend of Assisted Repatriation from Iran
(01 Dec. 1992 - 30 April 1999)

AFGHANS



Total No. of Returnees: 582,303 PAX

IRAQIS



Total No. of Returnees:21,285 PAX

* Figure as at end of April 1999